

A SOCIO-PRAGMATIC STUDY OF THE USE OF REQUESTS IN ENGLISH BY TUNISIAN EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract

The present study investigates the request behaviour of Tunisian EFL learners (TEFLL). For this purpose, the data were collected using a discourse completion test (DCT). Accordingly, 67 female masters' students studying at the Faculty of Letters and Humanities in Sfax (Tunisia) were asked to respond in English to six different situations in which they carried out the speech act of request. The data were analyzed by focusing on the directness level of requesting strategies according to the analytical framework of Blum-Kulka, et al (1989). A quantitative analysis of the data showed that the participants perform different request strategies (direct and conventionally indirect according to the social factors (social distance, social power and ranking of imposition) which are very influential in the choice of polite request strategies by TEFLL. The results revealed that, when requests are addressed to people in lower positions, TEFLL tend to use more direct request strategies in performing their request. The findings have also shown that TEFLL prefer to use conventionally indirect strategies in addressing their acquaintances and friends when the ranking of imposition is very high. On the other hand, when the requestee is in a higher position, TEFLL use more indirect strategies to show their respect and deference. Indirect request or negative politeness strategies are used to protect both of the requester and the requestees' faces. The study has shown that TEFLL responses are influenced by their linguistic and cultural backgrounds; thus, it is suggested that Tunisian learners of English should be aware of the socio-cultural and pragmatic differences between their L1 (Tunisian Arabic) and English learnt as a foreign language.

Keywords: politeness, request strategies, directness, social distance, social power, ranking of imposition.

Introduction

Successful communication entails not only the knowledge of grammar and text organization but also the pragmatic aspects of the target language. Indeed, languages differ in many linguistic areas such as phonology, syntax and lexicon but it has been shown that they also differ in the rules of speaking and the patterns of interaction which vary from one speech community to another (Olshtain and Cohen, 1991). Non-native speakers (NNS) may not be aware of these differences between their native language and other languages. Aribi (2011)

argues that a great focus on the grammatical and discourse rules of a target language may lead Tunisian EFL learners to pragmatic errors and therefore to miscommunication. An example extracted from an interaction that took place between a group of Tunisian EFL learners and their English teacher who is a native speaker of English could be used as illustration. The teacher said: "That's it for today. Don't forget to bring your homework assignments tomorrow." The students reply: "We can't. There is too much homework and we're very busy."

Studies on interlanguage pragmatics showed that second and foreign language learners and even relatively advanced language learners are likely to make serious communicative errors, which leads to failure in expressing and understanding the intended value of utterances (Kasper, 1990; Thomas, 1983). Cohen (2008, p. 226 cited in Delahaie, 2011) points out that "many advanced language learners are able to utilize complex linguistic systems, but are unable to express and interpret meaning in order to perform language functions (examples; apologies, requests) appropriately". In this context, Yu (2005) asserts that in addition to the knowledge of structure and discourse rules, foreign language speakers should pay attention to sociolinguistic and pragmatic rules of the target language when they talk to native speakers. Neither pragmatic nor sociolinguistic skills are independent of the linguistic components of communicative competence as they convey information about context (the extralinguistic environment of the utterance) (Delahaie, 2011). Indeed, the three components of communicative competence: pragmatic, sociolinguistic and linguistic competences are highly intertwined (Delahaie, 2011). Yu (2005) emphasizes that the lack of sociolinguistic awareness (knowing how utterances are produced and understood in different sociolinguistic contexts given the setting, the topic, and the relationships among the interlocutors), for example the awareness of how to use politeness strategies when interacting, may make these speakers seem so improper or incompetent to the point that this may engender cross-cultural misunderstandings and offence.

The following example is extracted from an interaction that occurred between a group of Tunisian EFL learners and their teacher who is a native speaker in the classroom. The learners intended to remind their teacher that they had told him to give them back their notes. They said: "We told you to give us our notes back". The NS teacher felt offended and drew their attention to the rudeness of the verb "to tell" which was due to the negative pragmatic transfer from their L1. Another example is taken from an interaction that occurred between a Tunisian second year student and her teacher who was a native English speaker. Appreciating what he did for her, the Tunisian student said *"I am really ashamed, Doctor*

Broadbent». The teacher was astonished and said: “why?”, as he found no clear relationship between what he did and what the student said (Ben Abdallah, 2009). The failure experienced by the Tunisian student in conveying the intended message, “thanking her teacher”, was due to intercultural miscommunication

Data-based studies concerning interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) suggest that the failure in the assessment of politeness parameters of a speech community may cause pragmatic failure for NNS (Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Locastro, 2003; Watts, 2003). Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) note that there is a need for more empirical studies to find out how language learners communicate pragmatically in a second or foreign language. Among the features examined within the field of interlanguage pragmatics, learners' awareness and production of a variety of speech acts has been widely investigated in both second and foreign language contexts. Cohen and Olshtain (1993) state that NNS are likely to deviate from native speaker norms of speech act realizations such as requests because of their complexity and the cognitive demands of speech act sets which can cause miscommunication between NNS and NS and further potential hazards even in communication among NNS because they belong to different cultural backgrounds. This study is an attempt to examine requests as an important type of speech acts. It investigates polite request strategies as produced by Tunisian EFL learners. In fact, there is a need for further research on the pragmatic competence of Tunisian EFL students engaged in interaction with other international interlocutors in all aspects because there is a gap in the literature in the Tunisian context. This study can be considered as an attempt to contribute to filling in this gap. It will specifically focus on the degree of TEFL success in terms of the level of directness in realizing these acts by gaining information about their pragmatic ability to express themselves in different contexts.

Research questions

The study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- 1- What are the request strategies performed by TEFL?
- 2- Do social dominance, social distance and the ranking of imposition have an effect in the choice of request strategies for Tunisian EFL learners when performing requests?
- 3- In what ways, if any, does the participants' culture affect the way TEFL make requests?

The first question aims to discover the different requests strategies used by TEFL. By addressing the second question, the linguistic performance of the participants will be

evaluated based on the effect of three major variables (social dominance, social distance and the ranking of imposition) on their choice of request strategies. The third question aims to uncover the cultural conventions that can influence the participants when performing requests.

Literature Review

Speech Act Theory

One of the important approaches within interlanguage pragmatics is the application of the notion of speech acts. Speech Act Theory (SAT) was founded by the British philosopher J.L Austin in 1962. Austin (1962) postulates that any language performs communicative acts. He explains that speech is a unit of speaking used to perform different functions in communication and to accomplish particular purposes. These utterances are called speech acts. Austin (1962, p. 94-108) categorized the utterance into three layers:

- (1) The locutionary act refers to an utterance simply constructed by its literal or propositional meaning.
- (2) The illocutionary act is the real action performed by the utterance, i.e. the conventionalized meaning.
- (3) The perlocutionary act refers to the effect of the utterance upon the listener.

Austin considered the illocutionary act as the most important of the three acts because it is actually what the speaker wants to achieve through the action of uttering the sentences. For example, “could you lend me your book, please?” can function as a request where the requester asks the requestee to perform something for him and is considered as an illocutionary act (Al-Marrani, 2010).

Speech Act Theory was later developed by Searle (1969) by incorporating illocutionary acts into linguistic theory (1969). Searle (1969) asserts that all illocutionary acts fit into five categories:

1. *Representatives* which tell people how things are, (e.g. suggest, deny, swear, report, etc.)
2. *Directives* are attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something (e.g. order, request, invite, command, etc.)
3. *Comissives* by which the speaker commits himself to do things (e.g. intend, promise, vow, undertake, etc.)
4. *Expressives* express speaker’s feelings and attitudes (e.g. thank, congratulate, apologize, detest, etc.)

5. *Declarations or declaratives* bring about changes in the institutional state of affairs through utterances (e.g. resign, appoint somebody, fire somebody, etc.). For instance, a priest stating: “I now pronounce you man and wife”.

Searle (1976) proposed that all speech acts, except explicit performatives, are indirect to some degree. However, the problem posed by indirect speech act is how the hearer can understand the indirect meaning of the sentence. According to Searle (1976) certain linguistic forms will tend to become conventionalized standard idiomatic forms for indirect speech acts. Al-Marrani, (2010) states that a question such as “can you reach the dictionary?” is not used to be meant as an inquiry but as an indirect request to pass the dictionary. The problem posed, here, is how a hearer can understand the indirect meaning of the sentence. Al-Marrani (2010) notes that for example, using the “can you” form of request instead of using imperative shows that the speaker is polite and does not presume to know about the hearer’s ability and also gives the hearer the option of refusing. For the purposes of this study, speech act theory will provide insights about TEFL speech act production and particularly their requesting behavior.

The speech act of request

The study of requests is one of the speech acts studies that have attracted much attention. According to Trosborg (1995), Sifianou (1999) and Reiter (2000), requests consist of two main parts, namely those of the core request or head act, and the peripheral modification devices. The head act consists of the main utterance which has the function of requesting and can stand by itself. For example, the request head act “Can/could you open the window?” is used as conventionally indirect request expressing ability. On the other hand, the peripheral modification devices are optional items that serve to either mitigate or intensify the force of the requesting move. Request modification devices are made up of two main groups: internal and external modifiers. While internal modifiers are those devices appearing within the same request head act, external modifiers are those appearing in the immediate linguistic context surrounding the request head act, either preceding or following it (Safont, 2008 cited in Esther Uso-Juan (2010, p. 240)). An example of an external modification (opener) is “*Do you think* you could open the window?” which aims at introducing the intended request and seeks the addressee’s co-operation. Another example of an external modification (preparatory) is “*May I ask you a favor?* Could you open the window?” which is used to prepare the addressee for the subsequent request (see Esther Uso-Juan 2010, for further examples and types of request modification devices). This study focuses only on the head act of requests.

Considering Searle's (1969) classification of illocutionary acts (i.e., representatives, directives, expressives, commissives, and declarations), requests fall under the second category, that of directives, which have been regarded as "an attempt to get hearer to do an act which speaker wants hearer to do, and which it is not obvious that hearer will do in the normal course of events or of hearer's own accord" (p. 66). Imperatives, interrogatives and declaratives are the linguistic realizations of requests in the English language. Kılıçkaya (2010) asserts that the ability to request information or services has to do with both knowing how to perform a request in its less face-threatening form and having the ability to use lexical and grammatical resources properly in a specified context. Aijmer (1996) notes that requests forms are largely conventionalized and cannot be produced simply by manipulating one's grammatical knowledge. Thus, learners have to learn about NS conventional forms to know how to realise a request appropriately in a given context. Accordingly, second/foreign language learners are expected to acquire the form of the TL accurately and to use it in the target community context to convey meanings appropriately, coherently and in a strategically effective way (Liendo, 2012) but it is crucial to note that these conventions are not necessarily universal to all varieties of a language. Kılıçkaya (2010) points out that it would be not be right to take for granted that every learner could produce this type of conventionalized language by making use of his/her knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. That is, it is important to understand the effects of context on linguistic choice.

Linguistic politeness and face

Linguistic politeness is a relatively new sub-field of linguistics that has received a great deal of literature. Yet, it remains a fuzzy term despite the fact that it is a crucial element of interpersonal communication in all cultures. It is a communication strategy used by people to maintain good relationships among them. According to many researchers (Holmes, 2006; Brown, 2004; Watts, 2003; Thomas, 1995; Kasper 1990), politeness could be defined as means of expressing consideration for others. It is to show concern for social face while interacting. The concept of face was first proposed by Erving Goffman who defined it as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman, 1967, p.5). Then it was defined by Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 61) as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself". In any interaction, this "self-image" could be maintained or lost. Each participant in communication aims to maintain both their own and others' face via recognizing others' wants and understanding their desires. Based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, requests are Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) since a speaker is imposing her/his will

on the hearer (p. 65). Many theories have been proposed in the area of politeness such as Lakoff's (1973) maxims of politeness, Grice (1975) Cooperative Principle (CP) and Leech's (1983) work on politeness but Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) theory has remained the most seminal and influential theory in the area of politeness.

Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness

Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) assert that politeness is ubiquitous as in any interaction people negotiate their roles and try to behave accordingly in order to maintain each other's face. According to them, every individual has two types of face: one is positive and the other is negative. Positive face is the want to be approved and appreciated by others i.e. the desire that the self-image be appreciated and approved of by interactants while negative face is the need to be independent, the desire for freedom of action and freedom from imposition. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), in any casual interaction, there are certain illocutionary acts that impede the speaker's and/or hearer's positive and negative face; thus every utterance represents a potential Face Threatening Act (FTA) either to the negative face or to the positive one. For example, when performing a request, the speaker and/or hearer face could be maintained or lost since requests are FTAs as maintained by Brown and Levinson (1987). Hence, people need to employ an array of strategies called "politeness strategies" in order to mitigate interpersonal conflicts and avoid these FTA's. Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed four politeness strategies to minimize the FTA's: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record indirect strategy.

- **The bald on-record strategy:**

The speaker does nothing to minimize threats to the hearer's face and reduce the impact of the FTA's as there is a high level of confidence among speakers being close friends or members of the same family.

- **The positive politeness strategy:**

The speaker here tries to minimize the distance between him and his hearer by expressing friendliness and group reciprocity and recognizing the hearer's desire to be respected. Strangers and people who are just starting a relationship tend to use this strategy.

- **The negative politeness strategy:**

It recognizes the hearer's face and recognizes simultaneously that the speaker is imposing something on his hearer. Some expressions could be used here such as: I don't want to bother you but ...or I was wondering if ... in order to introduce bad news, request a favor or make a comment.

- **Off-record indirect strategy:**

The speaker tries to avoid the direct FTA by removing himself from any imposition. Examples of off-record or highly indirect strategies include hints, metaphors, etc. A classical example found in Pragmatics books is when someone uses the indirect strategy by saying “It’s getting cold in here”. The speaker’s intention is that the listener would get up and close the window without directly asking his/her listener to do so.

Brown and Levinson (1987) and other researchers such as Clyne (1994), Morand (1996) and Scollon and Scollon (1995) agree that the concepts of politeness, face, face needs and FTA are universal as people in different cultures share a great set of politeness conventions but their manifestations i.e. politeness strategies are culture-specific since they differ from one speech community to another. Speech act realizations vary from one speech act community to another because the participants are influenced by their cultural norms and values. In terms of politeness, the expression of certain polite behaviors may be considered less polite by speakers of another language or also by different speakers of the same language. This study investigates which politeness strategies are used by Tunisian EFL learners in performing the speech act of request.

Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) argue that there are three social factors to determine the level of politeness between the speaker and the hearer: *The relative power of the hearer (P)* that the hearer has over the speaker. (Asking a favor from a friend, for example, is more easily done than asking the same favor from a superior). *The social distance (D)* between the speaker and the addressee (for example, it is easier to perform a face-threatening act with an acquaintance than with a stranger). *The degree of imposition (R)* of a specific face-threatening act. (For instance, showing the way to the hospital is not as difficult as giving a lift to the hospital).

They note that P, D and R can be assumed to “subsume most of the culturally specific social determinants of FTA expression” (p16). -The present study aims to determine whether social dominance, social distance and the ranking of imposition variables have an effect in the choice of request strategies for Tunisian EFL learners when performing the speech act of request.

Previous studies on the speech act of requests

The speech act of request has attracted much attention and many studies have been carried out about it so far. The present study investigates the request behaviour of Tunisian EFL learners based on the analytical framework proposed by Blum-Kulka, et al (1989) inspired from the CCSARP (Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization project). The CCSARP studies two types of speech acts which are requests and apologies to investigate cases of cross-cultural and interlingual variations - if any. It involves seven languages including English, French, German, Spanish and Hebrew. Data was collected through a written questionnaire in the form of a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) involving more than one thousand respondents. The DCT was originally developed for comparing the speech act realization of native and non-native Hebrew speakers (Blum-Kulka, 1982). As for requests, they are classified into a nine-point scale of mutually exclusive categories ranging from the most direct (imperative) to the most indirect (mild hints). The CCSARP's results reveal that indirect requests are the most frequent type of requests in all the languages studied, however, it is also shown that there are marked cross-cultural differences in performing requests. For example, Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) assert that, under the same social constraints, speakers of Hebrew tend to be more direct in performing their requests than speakers of German who use more request modifications than speakers of other languages. It is also found that the cultural factors interact strongly with situational ones. For illustration, an example taken from Olshtain and Cohen (1989, p. 53) represents a situation in which a female speaker of English living in Israel unintentionally bumps into an Israeli man while pushing her shopping trolley in a supermarket. She tries to apologize for the man but the latter does not notice it as an apology and expects another behavior. The woman: "I'm sorry. (In Hebrew).
The man: "Lady you could at least apologize."

Among other empirical studies that investigated the speech act of request is the one conducted by Jalilifar (2009) who carried out a cross-sectional investigation into the request strategies used by Iranian learners of English as a Foreign Language and Australian native speakers of English. The participants of this study were 96 BA and MA Persian students and 10 native speakers of English. The data collection method used was a Discourse-Completion-Test (DCT) to elicit the speech act of request as used by each group. DCT situations are based on two social factors which are social power and social distance. The findings of the study reveal that there is a pragmatic development on the part of EFL learners, particularly in the movement from direct to conventionally indirect strategies. Learners with higher proficiency overuse indirect requests; while native speakers balance between request strategies. The lower proficiency learners, on the other hand, overuse the

most direct strategy type. As for social variables, Iranian EFL learners are sensitive to social power but not to social distance. Jalilifar (2009) attributes this to insufficient sociopragmatic knowledge to display proper social behavior. But what is at stake here, is the vexed problematic of determining “proper social behavior”.

Kılıçkaya (2010) investigated the pragmatic knowledge of Turkish EFL students in using certain request strategies. Data were collected through a type of Discourse-Completion-Test, an open item- verbal response only production questionnaire, elicited from 40 undergraduate Turkish EFL students. The findings of the study revealed that Turkish EFL students have linguistic means to operate pragmatically in various contexts while requesting. However, their success in the use of the request strategies in situations requiring certain level of politeness was relatively not satisfactory. A statistical analysis of data shows that Turkish EFL learners tend to use more conventional direct strategies. In addition, the most indirect level/ bald-on-record strategy also occurred while the nonconventional indirect level/off-record strategy almost never occurred except in one case. The findings also reveal that the indirect requests are the most frequently used type, which is in alignment with the findings obtained by House and Kasper (1987), Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) and Trosborg (1995). Kılıçkaya (2010) attributes the failure of Turkish EFL students to use requests appropriately to the very limited range of forms presented to them by language learning/teaching textbooks and practiced. In the same context, Ishihara & Cohen (2010) assert that learners’ divergence from pragmatic norms could be due to either the lack of their background knowledge, misleading instruction received from teachers or textbooks or learners’ choice not to learn pragmatic rules (p.77-89).

Taking into account research conducted in the Arab world, many studies have been done. Umar (2004) carried out a sociolinguistic study to compare the request strategies performed by advanced Arab learners of English to those strategies used by native speakers of English. A Discourse-Completion-Test (DCT) is used to elicit data from the subjects. The participants of this study are made up of two groups. The first group is composed of 20 Arab students enrolled in graduate English courses in four Arabic universities while the second group is composed of 20 British students perusing graduate programs in three British universities. The findings of the study revealed that when addressing to equals or people in higher ranking positions, both groups resort to conventionally indirect strategies. However, when addressing to people in lower positions, the Arabic sample (composed of five Sudanese, five Saudis, five Egyptians and five Bahraini) employ more direct request strategies than the British sample even though the Arab participants have a wide range of different social norms.

Umar (2004) attributes this preference to sociocultural reasons since Arab learners of English may fall back on their cultural background when formulating their requests strategies. However, what is worthy to note is that the results of this study cannot be generalized to all Arabic-speaking countries. As for the syntactic and semantic modifications of request strategies, it is found that the native speakers of English use more semantic and syntactic modifiers than their Arabic counterparts and hence their requests sound more polite and tactful. Umar (2004) emphasizes the importance of the awareness of socio-pragmatic differences between Arabic and English and suggests the implementation of a variety of classroom drills and exercises such as role play to enhance linguistic and cultural appropriateness of different speech acts. Umar (2004) further suggests that students should be implicitly and explicitly instructed to observe the role of social distance and social power in performing request. Learners of English should also be taught the proper syntactic and semantic techniques to modify their requests.

Al-Marrani (2010) conducted a socio-pragmatic study of polite request strategies made by Yemeni learners of English as a foreign language. The data was collected using a Discourse Completion Test (DCT). The respondents of the study were 196 undergraduate students 98 of whom were males and 98 were females. The data were analyzed according to the analytical framework proposed by Blum-Kulka, et al (1989). The results of the study show that the participants employ different polite request strategies (direct, conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect) with softeners to mitigate the impact of request. Yemeni EFL students tend to use conventionally indirect strategies more than other strategies when the social distance, social power and ranking of imposition are very high between the requester and requestee. On the other hand, when the interlocutors have equal status and when the speaker has a higher status than the hearer, the participants prefer to use more direct strategies.

In fact, the question of whether students should conform to native speaker norms of English, in an era when English is increasingly used in international contexts, is one which has been keenly debated in recent years (Timmis, 2002). Cook (1998) asked a challenging question: why should the attested language use of a native-speaker community be a model for learners of English as an international language? A potential answer might be “there is no reason why it should, but it may be that some students want it to be, even when we least expect it” (Timmis, 2002).

The current study investigates polite request strategies as performed by Tunisian EFL learners in an attempt to filling in the gap in the existing literature as to my best knowledge; there is no study that tackled the topic in question in the Tunisian context.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study are 67 female masters' students studying in the English department of the Faculty of Letters and Humanities in Sfax, Tunisia, to whom a DCT was administered. Master's students are advanced learners of English. They are NSs of Tunisian Arabic speaking English as a foreign language. Their age range between 22 and 31 years and the mean age was 24.5. The respondents are relatively homogenous in terms of their cultural background and academic experiences. The DCT was administered to TEFL after a training period that focused on reading, grammar and conversation skills and lasted for the second semester of the academic year (2010-2011).

Procedure

Data were collected by means of a DCT which aimed at examining the production of request formulations. The DCT focuses only on the speech act of request. The questionnaire used in this study involves six written situations that denote six different situations that the respondents may encounter. The participants were asked to read a short description for each situation carefully and then write their responses in English. They were instructed to respond as much as possible as they would have done in actual situations. The situations vary according to a number of social variables: social distance, social dominance and the ranking of imposition. The situations used in the present study were as far as possible varied in terms of contexts.

Regarding the data elicitation method used in the current study, it is worthy to note that the DCT has some limitations. DCTs data are said to be weaker than those collected from natural conversations because they may differ in certain ways. Billmyer and Varghese (2000) note that DCT responses are shorter in length, simpler in wording and show less elaborated negotiations in conversations. Other methods could be used such as role play method that represents an approximation of natural discourse if data is carefully elicited (Nurani, 2009). In spite of its weaknesses, DCT is still better than other major elicited data instruments because its efficacy in administration makes it a valuable and necessary instrument in interlanguage pragmatic research (Nurani, 2009).

For the purposes of this study, data taken from the pragmatic production part of the DCT are analyzed. This allows evaluating EFL learners' polite request strategies and the effect of social distance, social power and ranking of imposition in their choice of request strategies as well as investigating cases of pragmatic transfer -if any. This analysis is based on an independent examination of each response. In each situation there is a brief description of the relationship between the participants (acquaintance or stranger), their dominance over each other (high, equal or low) and the ranking of imposition of requests (high or low).

Coding scheme

The DCT data are analyzed following the coding scheme of Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). Blum-Kulka et al. (1989)'s analytical framework is based upon the universal premise that request strategies in all languages show three levels of directness: directness level, internal modification and external modification. The focus of this study was only on the directness level of requesting strategies. They explain that "by directness is meant the degree to which the speaker's illocutionary intent is apparent from the locution" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p. 278). They suggested a typology of request acts formulations which classified request into three levels of directness: direct, conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect. Request strategies were classified on a nine-point scale as follows (Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper 1989, p. 18):

- 1- MOOD DERIVABLE: utterances in which the grammatical mood of the verb signals illocutionary force, e.g.: the imperative.
- 2- PERFORMATIVES: utterances in which the illocutionary force is explicitly named e.g.: I am asking you to ...
- 3- HEDGED PERFORMATIVES: utterances in which the naming of the illocutionary force is modified by hedging expressions, e.g.: I must/ have to ask you to...
- 4- OBLIGATION STATEMENTS: utterances which state the obligation of the hearer to carry out the act, e.g.: You'll have to/ should/ must/ ought to...
- 5- WANT STATEMENTS: utterances which state the speaker's desire that the hearer carries out the act, e.g.: I really want you to/ I'd like to...
- 6- SUGGESTORY FORMULAE: utterances which contain a suggestion to do X e.g.: How about ...
- 7- QUERY PREPARATORY: utterances containing reference to preparatory conditions (e.g., ability, willingness) as conventionalized in any specific language e.g.: Could you..., please? / Would you...?

- 8- STRONG HINTS: utterances containing partial reference to object of element needed for the implementation of the act (e.g., you have left the kitchen in a right mess.)
- 9- MILD HINTS: utterances that make no reference to the request proper (or any of its elements) but are interpretable as requests by context (e.g., 'I am a nun.' in response to a persistent hassler).

It is worth noting that points from 1 to 5 are clearly direct request strategies while points from 6 to 9 appear to be indirect strategies. Mild hints could be considered as a form of non-conventionalized indirect request strategy.

Results

According to Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), request strategies could be classified into three categories depicting the relative social power between the interlocutors. They are as follows: higher-ranking to lower-ranking, equal to equal and lower-ranking to higher-ranking request strategies. These strategies are generally expected to be influenced by the relation between the interlocutors, i.e., the requester and requestee and the relative dominance over each other. Another variable that governs the relationship between the requester and the requestee is the social distance where the requestee is either an acquaintance or a stranger to the requester in addition to the ranking of imposition of the request which is either high or low. These relations will constitute the major variables along which data analysis will be categorized. The table below summarizes the six situations according to the social variables.

Table 1: Description of the situations according to the social variables

Situations	Requester	Requestee	Social power	Social distance	Ranking of imposition
Customer asks the waiter for the bill.	customer	waiter	S>H	+SD	Low
Speaker asks his/her brother to bring some vegetables.	speaker	Younger brother	S>H	-SD	Low
Student asks his/her friend to lend him/her his/her note.	student	friend	S=H	-SD	high
Speaker asks his/her neighbour to drive him to hospital.	speaker	neighbor	S=H	-SD	high
Student asks his/her professor for a review session.	student	professor	S<H	+SD	Low
An employee asks his/her for permission to leave work early.	employee	manager	S<H	+SD	High

Request Strategies used by high-Ranking to lower - Ranking subjects

Data generated by situations 1 and 2 denote Request strategies chosen by high-ranking to lower ranking subjects.

Situation One

In situation one (The customer is asking the waiter for the bill), the speaker has social dominance over the requestee. The latter is a stranger to the speaker and the ranking of imposition is low.

Table 2: Distribution of frequency and percentage of request strategies for situation one.

Strategy		Situation 1	
		F	%
1	Mood derivable	27	40.2
2	Performative	0	0
3	Hedged performative	6	8.9
4	Obligation statement	3	4.4
5	Want statement	5	7.4
6	Query preparatory	21	31.3
7	Suggestory preparatory	5	7.4
8	Strong hint	0	0
9	Mild hint	0	0
Total		67	100

Figure 1: Request strategies used by TEFLL in situation one.

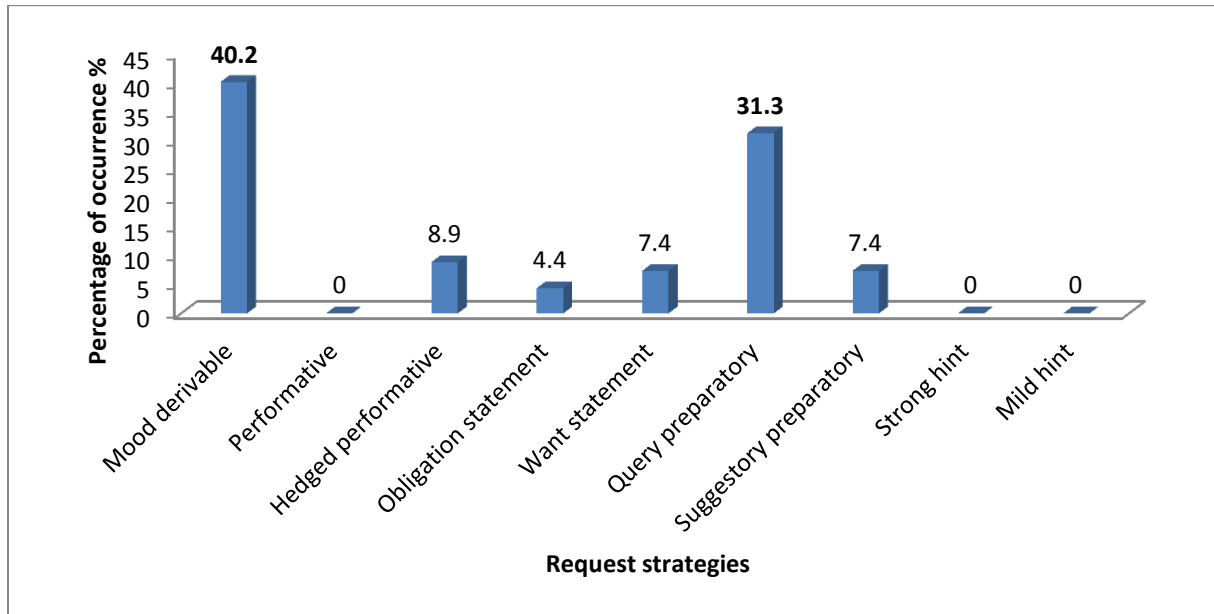


Table 2 and figure 1 show that TEFLL tend to use more direct strategies in addressing the waiter by means of mood derivables 40.2 %. The next most frequently chosen strategies are conventionally indirect strategies by means of query preparatory 31.3%. Hedged performative, want statement, suggestory preparatory and obligation statement respectively account for 8.9%, 7.4% and 4.4%. It is also observed that hints either “strong” or “mild” are not used.

The findings have shown that TEFLL Learners prefer to resort to more direct strategies when addressing to people in a lower position. It is worth noting that requests were softened by the use of some lexical phrases such as “please”, “excuse me”, “if you don’t mind” and “I wonder if” since the requestee is a stranger to the requester. The preference of directness in this situation may be considered as an instance of solidarity politeness strategies, in that it expresses camaraderie. Thus, it could be considered as an evidence of transfer from the Tunisian cultural norms.

Sample responses given by TEFLL to situation one

Situation One (You are having dinner at a restaurant. You want the waiter to bring you the bill. What would you say to him?)

Could you bring me the bill, please?

The bill please!

Can I have the bill, please?

Situation Two

In situation two (The speaker is asking her younger brother to bring some vegetables), the speaker has social power over the hearer. They are family members and the ranking of imposition is low.

Table 3: Distribution of frequency and percentage of request strategies for situation two.

Strategy		Situation 2	
		F	%
1	Mood derivable	31	46.2
2	Performative	0	0
3	Hedged performative	0	0
4	Obligation statement	4	5.9
5	Want statement	3	4.4
6	Query preparatory	29	43.2
7	Suggestory preparatory	0	0
8	Strong hint	0	0
9	Mild hint	0	0
Total		67	100

Figure 2: Request strategies used by TEFL for situation two.

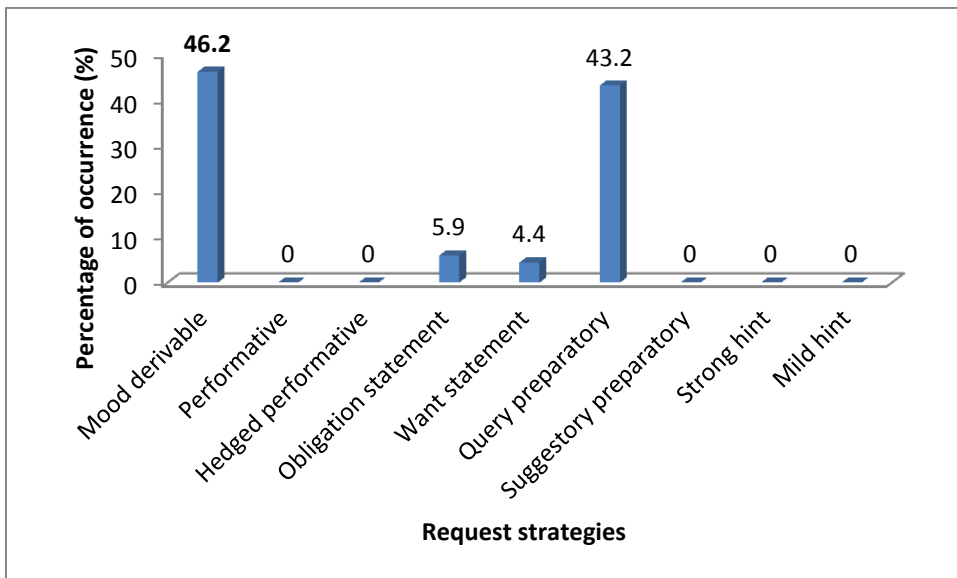


Table 3 and figure 2 above show that the most frequently used request strategies are direct strategies. TEFLL tend to use direct strategies by means of mood derivable (46.2%) more than other strategies, whereas obligation statements and want statements respectively account for 5.9 % and 4.4%. The next most frequently chosen strategies are conventionally indirect strategies by means of query preparatory 43.2%; however, there is no occurrence of indirect strategies.

The findings have shown that Tunisian EFL Learners tend to use direct strategies when requesting their acquaintance who is in lower position. In this situation, the participants use direct strategies because the speaker is in a higher position than the hearer (requestee). The use of direct requests in this situation shows solidarity and group reciprocity. These strategies fall under positive politeness strategies of Brown and Levinson (1987). TEFLL employed high levels of directness without the fear of losing 'face' because they are influenced by their Tunisian cultural background and traditions by which Tunisians may resort to directness to address lower people in position. However, it is worth noting that findings for situations one and two are to some extent indeterminate.

Here are some examples of the responses given by the subjects to situation two.

Sample responses given by TEFLL to situation two

Situation Two (You want your younger brother to bring some vegetables from the near-by grocery. What would you say to your younger brother?)

1. Go to the greengrocer and bring us some vegetables.
2. Could you bring me some vegetables from the near-by grocery, brother?

Request Strategies Used by Equal to Equal subjects

Equal to equal relation is denoted by situations 3 and 4.

Situation three

In situation three, (Student is asking his friend to lend her his note), the speaker and the hearer are two friends so there is neither social power nor social distance between them; however, the ranking of imposition is high.

Table 4: Distribution of frequency and percentage of request strategies for situation three.

Strategy		Situation 2	
		F	%
1	Mood derivable	4	5.9
2	Performative	0	0
3	Hedged performative	0	0
4	Obligation statement	0	0
5	Want statement	9	13.4
6	Query preparatory	50	74.6
7	Suggestory preparatory	0	0
8	Strong hint	4	5.9
9	Mild hint	0	0
Total		67	100

Figure 3: Request strategies used by TEFLL for situation three.

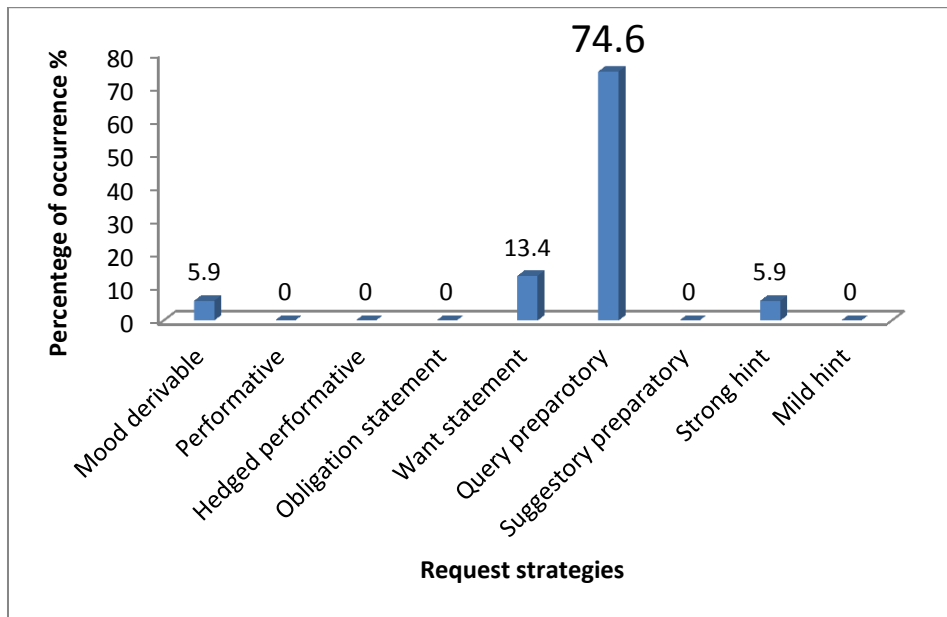


Table 6 and figure 5 show that TEFLL prefer to use conventionally indirect strategies (query preparatory 74.6%) in this situation more than direct strategies such as want statements (13.4%) and mood derivable (5.9%) and also much more than indirect strategies which account for 5.9% for strong hints.

The findings reveal that in addressing their friends, participants by using conventionally indirect strategies try to show a high degree of politeness in order to minimize or soften the

impact of request on the hearer and to protect her face and the hearer's face since the ranking of imposition is very high.

Situation Three states (You missed an important lecture and you want to borrow your friend's note to copy what you have missed. What would you say to your friend?)

Sample responses given by TEFLL to situation three

- 1- Could you borrow me your notes, please?
- 2- I missed yesterday's lecture and I want to borrow your notebook, if possible.
- 3- Please, lend me your notebook! I want to copy yesterday's lecture because I missed it.

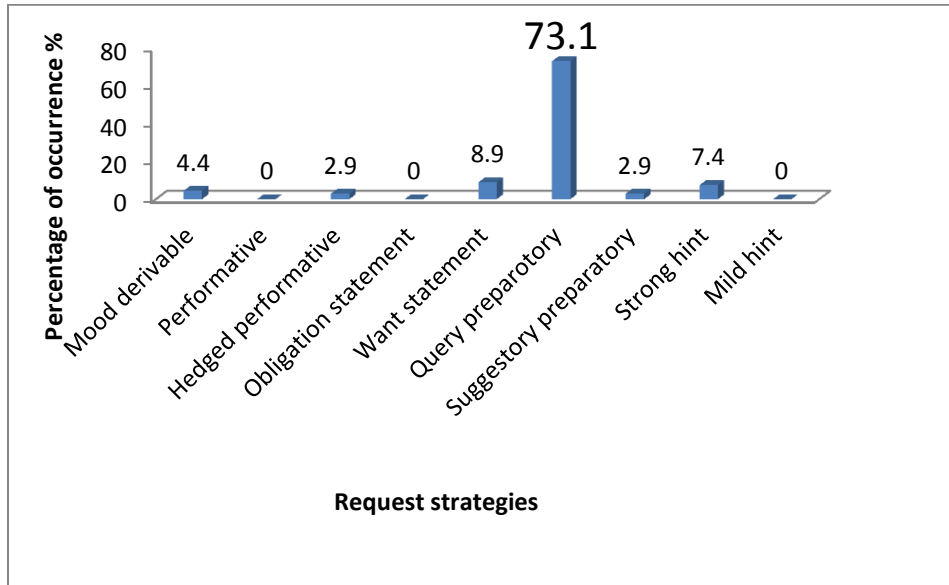
Situation four

In situation four, (The speaker is asking her neighbour to drive him to hospital), the requester and the requestee are two neighbours so there is no social power between them whereas the ranking of imposition is high.

Table 5: Distribution of frequency and percentage of request strategies for situation four.

Strategy		Situation 2	
		F	%
1	Mood derivable	3	4.4
2	Performative	0	0
3	Hedged performative	2	2.9
4	Obligation statement	0	0
5	Want statement	6	8.9
6	Query preparatory	49	73.1
7	Suggestory preparatory	2	2.9
8	Strong hint	5	7.4
9	Mild hint	0	0
Total		67	100

Figure 4: Request strategies used by TEFLL for situation four



According to the data provided in table 5 and figure 4 above, it is clear that there is a greater tendency by TEFLL to use conventionally indirect strategies by means of query preparatory 73.1% in addressing their neighbors more than other direct strategies by means of want statements 8.9%, mood derivable 4.4%, and hedge performative 2.9%, and also more than indirect strategies by means of strong hints 7.4% and conventionally indirect strategies by means of suggestory formulae 2.9%. The findings as shown in Table 5 reveal that TEFLL prefer to use conventionally indirect strategies when the ranking of imposition is very high and costs the hearer something. There is no feeling of either a power difference (- p) or distance (- D) between the participants. The findings have also shown that TEFLL tend to use conventionally indirect strategies even between neighbors in this situation in order to show a high degree of politeness since the ranking of imposition is high in order to protect the speaker's face and the hearer's face.

Sample responses given by TEFLL to situation four

Situation Four states: (You want to visit your cousin who has been in hospital for a while. You want your neighbor to give you a lift to hospital. What would you say to your neighbor?)

- 1- Could you give me a lift to the hospital, please? My cousin is not very well.
- 2- My car has broken down and I have an emergency: My cousin is very ill.
- 3- I don't have any means of transport and I need your help to give me a lift to the hospital.

Request strategies used by lower-ranking to higher-ranking subjects

Lower-ranking to higher-ranking relation is denoted by situations 5 and 6.

Situation five

In situation five, (A student is asking her teacher for a review session), the hearer has social power over the speaker, the social distance is high and the ranking of imposition is low.

Table 6: Distribution of frequency and percentage of request strategies for situation five.

Strategy		Situation 5	
		F	%
1	Mood derivable	0	0
2	Performative	0	0
3	Hedged performative	4	5.9
4	Obligation statement	0	0
5	Want statement	7	10.4
6	Query preparatory	47	70.1
7	Suggestory preparatory	3	4.4
8	Strong hint	6	8.9
9	Mild hint	0	0
Total		67	100

Figure 5: Request strategies used by TEFL for situation five.

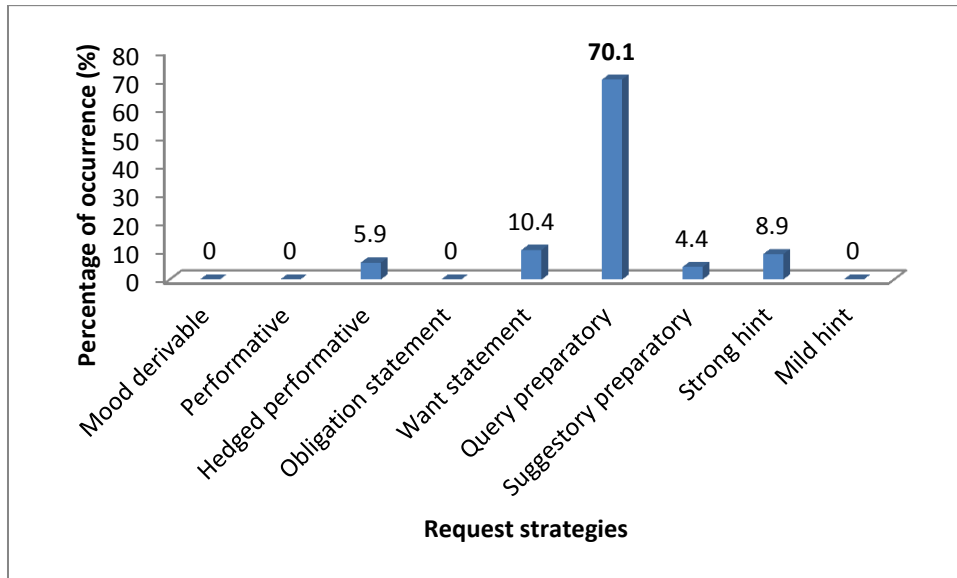


Table 6 and figure 5 revealed that TEFL have a great tendency to use conventionally indirect strategies by means of query preparatory 70.1% in addressing their teacher more than direct strategies by means of want statements 10.4%, mood derivable 3.6% and hedge performative 5.9% and more than indirect strategies by means of strong hints 8.9%. The findings as shown in table 6 reveal that TEFL tend to use the query preparatory request strategy more frequently than other strategies. The results showed that the social factors which are the power of the hearer over the speaker (P), the distance (D) between the speaker (S) and the hearer (H), and the risk of imposition (R) affect the choice of the participants in performing requests. This supports the claim of Brown and Levinson (1987).

Sample responses given by TEFL to situation five

Situation Five states (You want to request your professor who teaches you at the faculty to spend the next session reviewing for the exam because there are some specific points which are unclear to you and your classmates. What would you say to your professor?)

- 1- If you don't mind Sir, could you spend the next session explaining some unclear points?
- 2- Sorry Sir but I would like to ask you if there is any possibility of having a review session before the exam.
- 3- I wonder if you could spend the next session reviewing for the exam.

Situation six

In situation six (an employee is appealing to his/her manager for permission to leave early), the requestee has social power over the requester, the social distance is high and the ranking of imposition is high.

Table 7: Distribution of frequency and percentage of request strategies for situation six.

Strategy		Situation 6	
		F	%
1	Mood derivable	0	0
2	Performative	0	0
3	Hedged performative	2	2.9
4	Obligation statement	0	0
5	Want statement	4	5.9
6	Query preparatory	54	80.5
7	Suggestory preparatory	1	1.4
8	Strong hint	6	8.9
9	Mild hint	0	0
Total		67	100

Figure 6: Request strategies used by TEFLL for situation six.

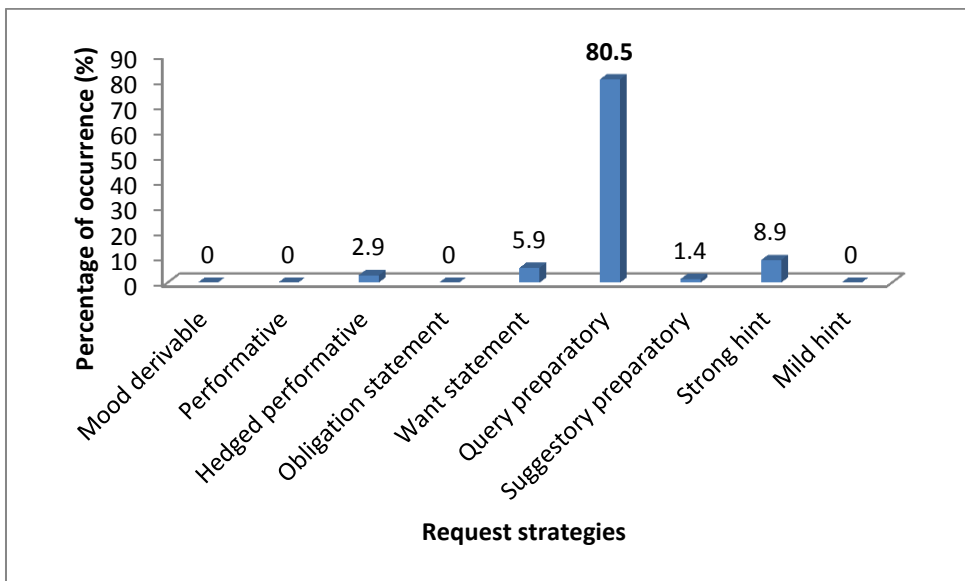


Table 7 and figure 6 below show that TEFLL tend to use indirect strategies by means of query preparatory 80.5% in addressing their manager much more than suggestory

preparatory (1.4%) and more than direct strategies by means of want statements 5.9%, and hedge performative 2.9%. Indirect strategy by means of strong hints 8.9% is also observed in the data to show a high degree of politeness in this situation.

The findings as shown in Table 8 reveal that TEFLL prefer to use indirect strategies when the hearer has social distance and power more than the speaker and when the ranking of imposition is very high. The requester, here, tries to remove himself from any imposition and show his/her respect to the requestee. The results of this situation also give support for the claim of Brown and Levinson (1987).

Discussion

The findings of situations five and six reveal that TEFLL prefer to use conventionally indirect strategies by means of query preparatory more than other strategies. The explanation for this preference is that the requestee is in a higher position, so TEFLL use query preparatory strategies to show their respect and deference by making indirect request or negative politeness strategies to protect their faces and the requestees' faces. The preference for indirect strategies and direct strategies with softeners in situation five and six seems to be the marker of respect of the hearer and to help negotiation of request and to soften conversational interaction.

Sample responses given by TEFLL to situation six

Situation Six states (You are an employee in a company .You want to request the manager of your company to let you leave work early because you have an appointment with the dentist. What would you say?)

- 1- Would you let me leave work early because I have an appointment with the dentist, please?
- 2- I would be so grateful if you let me leave early because I have to see the dentist.
- 3- Would you mind if I leave early, Sir? I am seeing my dentist.

Conclusion and implications

The findings of the current study revealed that TEFLL employ different request strategies (direct and conventionally indirect) in different contexts. Social factors such as the social power, the social distance and the ranking of imposition of request are shown to be very influential in the choice of request realizations performed by the participants. The most direct request strategies are used when the requestee is in lower position than the requester. When addressing their acquaintances and friends, TEFLL prefer to use conventionally indirect

strategies since the ranking of imposition is very high. It is found that more indirect strategies are used by TEFL learners to show their respect and deference to the hearer who is superior to them. Indirect request or negative politeness strategies are used to protect both of the requester and the requestees' faces. The findings revealed also that the participants' responses are influenced by their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. TEFL learners resort to Arabic communicative strategies (i.e. being more direct) when performing requests when addressing people in lower ranking positions because it is the expected behavior in Tunisian social traditions.

Tunisian EFL learners proved to be adept at using conventionalized indirect requests correctly to some extent. However, their success in the use of polite request strategies in certain situations requiring a certain level of politeness was relatively not satisfactory which would be clear when addressing people in lower ranking positions. The results of the present study cannot be generalized to all Tunisian EFL learners but rather, should be taken as preliminary indicators of the behavior of Tunisian EFL learners when initiating a request. Accordingly, this study suggests some useful pedagogical implications. It sheds light on the strong need for the implementation of pragmatics in second and foreign language learning because it would be difficult for Tunisian learners to employ polite request strategies without sufficient instruction on how languages differ in terms of directness. It is suggested that Tunisian teachers and syllabus designers have to integrate a sociopragmatic component in their programs of teaching the English language if they want their learners to succeed in speaking and using the language appropriately when interacting with NS of English. Tunisian learners of English should be aware of the socio-cultural and pragmatic differences between English and Arabic. They should be aware that indirectness is highly valued with Anglo-Saxon societies and being direct with NS of English may cause misunderstandings. Tunisian EFL learners need to know how to realize the request itself, what the speakers' intentions are in their use of the request, and how to answer appropriately when interacting with NS. In view of the cross-cultural complexity of speech acts (a point that it has been well attested to in the literature and shown in this paper), the teaching of the speech act of request should be based on a whole range of strategies available to learners so as to widen the input they receive. Learners need to be exposed to the way requests are used in real contexts in second/foreign language instructional contexts in order to avoid social misunderstandings (Martinez Flor & Uso Juan, 2010). In fact, foreign language learners, in general, need to understand culture, context and politeness to be able to function and communicate appropriately in the target language. Kasper (2001) and Kasper and Roever (2005) assert that in the classroom environment learners are generally not provided with

either appropriate input opportunities for contextualised practice or with chances of receiving feedback on their pragmatic competence. They consider the classroom context as an impoverished environment for the acquisition of pragmatics. Morand (1996) and O'Sullivan (2007) point out that politeness is generally presented to language learners implicitly, basically as things they should or should not say and do when interacting in English. The instruction of pragmatic aspects implicitly as well as explicitly is therefore necessary when the input is scarce or limited. In this sense, Kasper (1996, p. 147) states that "explicit teaching may be required to help foreign language learners develop pragmatic competence". Along with O'Sullivan (2007), teachers could help students understand appropriate polite communication by presenting the preferred and dispreferred strategies explicitly in the form of discussion or debate in relationship to target language structure. In fact, the English norms of politeness should be adhered to when using English as a means of interaction between native and non-native speakers but at the same time it is necessary to have "a different way of looking at the language, which is more inclusive, pluralistic, and accepting than the traditional, monolithic view of English in which there is one correct, standard way of using English that all speakers must strive for" (Matsuda 2003a, p. 727).

Foreign language learners need also to be engaged in a variety of awareness-raising and production activities. Flor and Juan (2006) point out that this kind of activities could be adopted and tailor-made for different EFL/ESP disciplines, as in this way, pragmatics could be integrated in different foreign language learning syllabi attending to learners' needs in a given discipline. Triki (2002) recommend that pragmatics should be behind the choice of teaching materials and taken as a guiding methodology in the organization of the materials and as a source of linguistic explanation for apparently structural concerns. The exposure of foreign language learners to authentic materials (as thoroughly defined in Trabelsi, 2011) can highly benefit them to raise their awareness about pragmatic issues such as politeness. More classroom awareness-raising activities are recommended in second and/or foreign language teaching.

Future studies may employ a larger population of male and female to shed light on the issue of gender differences in speech act behaviour and provide an actual survey of current ELT materials used to teach Tunisian EFL learners to show to what extent they address politeness strategies in social contexts, particularly when making requests.

Biodata

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Appendix 1:

The Discourse Completion Test (DCT)

Data to be used from this questionnaire are used for research purposes.

Instructions: Thank you very much for your time and help.

Six scenarios are described below in which you are expected to make a request on different occasions. Please read them carefully and write out what you are to say in real life scenarios.

Situation 1:

You have a nice meal in a public restaurant; and now you want the waiter to bring you the bill. What would you say to him?

.....
.....
.....

Situation 2:

You want your younger brother to bring some vegetables from the near-by grocery. What would you say to him?

.....
.....
.....

Situation 3:

You missed an important lecture and you want to borrow your friend's note to copy what you have missed. What would you say to your friend?

.....
.....
.....



Situation 4:

You want to visit your cousin who has been in hospital for a while. You want your neighbor to give you a lift to the hospital because your car has been broken down. What would you say to your neighbor?

.....
.....
.....

Situation 5:

You want to request your professor who teaches you at the faculty to spend the next session reviewing for the exam because there are some specific points which are unclear to you and your classmates. What would you say to your professor?

.....
.....
.....

Situation 6:

You are an employee in a company. You want to request the manager of your company to let you leave work early because you have an appointment with the dentist. What would you say?

.....
.....
.....

I will be grateful if you provide the following information about yourself.

Name (optional):

Age:

Thank you very much for your cooperation.